DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 441 634 RC 022 408

AUTHOR	Rittenmeyer, Steven D.
TITLE	Student Suicide and Illinois' Small Schools: Breaking the Silence.
INSTITUTION	Western Illinois Univ., Macomb. Illinois Inst. for Rural Affairs.
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	10p.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.iira.org/pubs/#RurRsrch.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Reports - Research (143)
JOURNAL CIT	Rural Research Report; v10 n9 Spr 1999
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Board of Education Policy; Counselor Training; *Court Litigation; Elementary Secondary Education; *Legal Responsibility; Prevention; *Rural Schools; School District Size; *School Districts; State Surveys; *Suicide
IDENTIFIERS	Adolescent Suicide; *Illinois; *Suicide Prevention; Training Needs

ABSTRACT

Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among American youth aged 5-24, and small and rural school districts must recognize and address this growing phenomenon. A survey of 462 Illinois principals reported 133 student suicides during the 5-year study period. Small school districts comprised 6 percent of Illinois school districts yet reported 29 percent of student suicides. Rural districts, a subcategory of small districts, represented 3 percent of school districts but reported 18 percent of student suicides. The staff most involved with student suicides had the least training, and small and rural districts were the least likely to have formal policies concerning suicides. Seven lawsuits related to suicides were filed against schools; the results were unfavorable to the schools on five occasions. The most common criticisms of schools in these cases were failure to refer troubled students for counseling prior to the death and lack of parental notification of their child's suicide ideations. Nine relevant legal principles are summarized, based on an analysis of case law. Recommendations include openly recognizing the problem, gathering resources and information, and promulgating a district policy on student suicide. Three Web sites provide references, resources, and program ideas. (TD)

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Rural
RESEARCH REPORT

Spring 1999
Volume 10, Issue 9

Published by the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs

Stipes Hall 518
Western Illinois University
1 University Circle
Macomb, IL 61455-1390
309/298-2237
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by Steven D. Rittenmeyer J.D.[1]

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Student Suicide and Illinois' Small Schools: Breaking the Silence

by Steven D. Rittenmeyer J.D.[1]

Introduction

The Columbine High School massacre of 1999 seared the realization that today's youth are more inclined than ever to turn to deadly violence to resolve their personal disputes with others into America's collective consciousness. Apparently lost in the collective rage against the teenage murderers is that, by killing themselves, they reaffirmed a second tragic phenomenon among our youth — that is, the perception that suicide is also a way to make one's personal troubles disappear. Young urban and rural boys and girls are choosing this permanent solution to life's transitory problems in far less complex — and far lonelier — circumstances. Most cases of youth suicide resemble the death of Erin Lyn Melvin.

In October 1996, in Galva, Illinois, an agricultural community of 2,700 in the western part of the state, high school principal Steve Johnson was informed that Erin was threatening suicide. More specifically, as alleged in the lawsuit filed by Erin's parents, he was made aware of a note in which the girl stated her intent to kill herself (Melvin v. Galva 1997). Believing that there was no way she would carry out the act, the principal responded by writing a note to a counselor, who was away at a meeting, directing him to see Erin first thing the next morning. He did not summon Erin from class to his office, nor did he try to contact her parents or anyone else at the time. Upon arriving at school the following morning, Mr. Johnson learned that thirteen-year old Erin had hung herself in the closet of her bedroom at her home the previous evening (Johnson deposition 1998).

According to 1991 World Health Organization data, youth suicide in the past 35 years has increased at a greater rate than for any other group: 300 percent for males and 230 percent for females. Moreover, a 1990 study reported that there are more than 500,000 attempts each year, with approximately one in every 100 or 5,000 attempts completed annually (Jackson 1999).

In 1998, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Youth Risk Behavior Survey revealed that suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among people ages 5 to 24 in America, accounting for approximately 12 percent of all deaths among the young. In its report, the CDC presented the latest results of its survey of nearly 11,000 high school students (U.S. Department of Heath and Human Services 1998). The findings were as follows:

- Approximately 24 percent (2,617) of young people had thought seriously about suicide.
- Females (30 percent) were nearly twice as likely as males (18 percent) to contemplate ending their lives.
- Approximately 18 percent (1,963) of those who had contemplated suicide had progressed in their thoughts to the point of crafting a plan to carry out the act.
- During the 12 months prior to the survey, 9 percent (981) had attempted to kill themselves.
- Approximately 3 percent (327) had perpetrated attempts which caused injury, poisoning, or overdose serious enough to require medical attention.

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[1]Author is Professor in the Department of Educational Administration, Western Illinois University, and of counsel to Robbins, Schwartz, Nicholas, Lifton, and Taylor, Ltd. This effort is dedicated to Tom and Eunice Hutson and to the memory of their beloved son Trent, 1978-1998. The author wishes to gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Ms. Suzan Nash, Executive Director, Western Illinois Regional Council/Community Action Agency and Dr. David Turner, Executive Director, Illinois Principals Association. Support for this research was provided by the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs. Any views expressed in this report belong solely to the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs or Western Illinois University. Layout by Darrell Sutton.

Research Objective and Method

During the summer of 1998, the Illinois Principals Association (IPA) and the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs (IIRA) at Western Illinois University jointly sponsored a survey of the state's public school principals. The purpose was to gather baseline data regarding the incidence of suicidal behavior among Illinois public school students, along with information concerning various legal and policy implications.

Surveys mailed to the 1,847 members of the Illinois Principals Association generated 462 (25 percent) responses. Three analytical categories were created based on total enrollment by district.

Small Districts are comprised of fewer than 1,000 students (a subcategory of the small district group, labeled Rural Districts, are those with 500 or fewer students in attendance); Mid-Size Districts range between 1,000 and 2,500 students; and Large Districts are those with more than 2,500 enrollment. A breakdown of the categories shows that Small Districts made up 60 percent of the respondents, of those 32 percent fit into the subcategory of Rural Districts. Mid-Size Districts accounted for 30 percent of the responses, and Large Districts accounted for 10 percent.

Survey Results

In the past five years, more than 80 percent of the districts had not had a student suicide. Of the districts reporting student suicides, approximately 11 percent had experienced a single event, while the remaining 9 percent experienced multiple deaths. Suicide attempts appear to be more widely spread, with 56 percent of the respondents reporting such incidents. Of this group, 42 percent reported multiple attempts.

Suicides

The total number of reported suicides was 133 during the five-year period **(Table 1)**. Of that number, 38 (29 percent) occurred in Small Districts, fifty-two (39 percent) happened in Mid-Size Districts, while Large Districts reported 43 (32 percent). Among the approximately 80 districts reporting student suicides, 26 (33 percent) are in the Small District category. That figure in itself is not disproportionate; however, when enrollment differentials among the three district categories are considered, the figure is noteworthy. The 26 Small Districts reporting student suicides amount to 9 percent of the respondents in this category and 6 percent of the total. In terms of suicide rates, Small Districts report a minimum of 38 self-inflicted deaths, or 29 percent of the total of 133. Thus, according to these data, 6 percent of the school districts in Illinois have experienced 29 percent of the student suicides over the past five years. And, surprisingly, these are the smallest districts.

Table 1. Reported Suicides by District Size

District Size	Reported Suicides
Small District	38
Rural District	24
Mid-Size District	52
Large District	43

Source: Illinois Principal Survey, 1998

In the Rural District subcategory, the data are even more unsettling. The 148 reporting districts with fewer than 500 students are equivalent to 32 percent of the total respondents. Of that group, 15 reported student suicides totaling at least 24 student deaths in the past five years. This group of the smallest schools which report suicides represents 3 percent of the total number of schools participating in the survey; however, the number of deaths reported constitutes 18 percent of the total.

Suicide Attempts

A conservative estimate is that at least 236 districts (56 percent) reported more than 900 attempted student suicides in the five years preceding the study **(Table 2)**. A categorical breakdown finds 28 Large Districts reporting more than 200 attempts, 72 Mid-Size Districts reporting over 300, and 136 Small Districts reporting almost 400 incidents. In the Rural District subcategory, approximately 54 percent of the respondents said that none of their students had attempted suicide; however, 66 districts documented at least 165 incidents. These data conservatively show that the 32 percent of schools in Illinois defined as small account for 40 percent of all the attempted student suicides in the five years preceding this study. Moreover, 16 percent of schools in the smallest category experienced 18 percent of the attempts.

Table 2. Reported Suicide Attempts by District Size

District Size	Reported Attempts
Small District	388
Rural District	165
Mid-Size District	307
Large District	212

Source: Illinois Principal Survey, 1998

Demographics

The demographics of the suicide phenomenon among Illinois students reveal some very clear trends. First, there is a wide age range among the survey respondents encompassing literally all ages of students. In addition, as reported in the Centers for Disease Control data, females are clearly more apt to attempt to kill themselves. In the present study, including multiple attempts by the same student, 278 (126 percent) reported incidents involved girls, while 160 (73 percent) involved boys. The most frequent age is 16, while the median age is 14.5.

Risk Factors

Risk factors for suicide attempts are revealing. In all three categories of schools, depression is present in more than 90 percent of cases. New or increased use of drugs or alcohol is the second or third ranked factor across the categories. In the lower grades, clinically diagnosed psychological problems and the loss of parents due to death also figure prominently. At the high school level, romantic disappointment and the loss of a friend by suicide replace psychological problems and parental loss as the most significant determinants of risk for self-inflicted harm. A composite of the demographic information and the stated risk factors shows that a depressed, 16 year old girl with a history of substance abuse and/or disappointment in romance is at the highest risk to injure or kill herself. The risk factors and demographics were quite consistent across the district categories. Any differences did not appear to be significant.

Staff Involvement and Training

The survey asked which staff members had been involved with student suicides and/or attempts at suicide. Overall, the responses showed that counselors had the greatest level of involvement at 77 percent, followed by teachers at 72 percent, principals at 63 percent, and social workers at 52 percent. Principals become the most involved when there is a threatened suicide. In these incidences, the principal is involved 86 percent of the time, and teachers have the second highest rate at 80 percent. Counselor and social worker involvement with threatened suicides occurs in roughly 70 percent of the reported cases. These overall patterns differ somewhat in Small District settings.

In Small Districts, principals maintained the highest level of school personnel involvement in attempted or threatened suicide with a 90 percent rate. Teachers, however, are the most involved in incidents of actual student suicide with an 86 percent response to the survey question. Teachers also are involved in approximately 80 percent of the threatened/attempted suicides by students in Small Districts. Even though the survey did not investigate the level of participation among staff, it is a fair conclusion that the lack of specialized staff, such as counselors and social workers, in rural areas leads to the greater involvement by faculty and building administrators.

A second question sought information about who received training. Among all respondents, 72 percent of counselors had training, followed by social workers at 64 percent, school psychologists at 45 percent, principals with 40 percent, and teachers with 31 percent. This stark difference between the level of actual staff involvement and training was prevalent throughout districts of all sizes.

Policy and Practice To Deal with Student Suicide

The Illinois survey also inquired about established methods of dealing with both actual and threatened suicides. Overall, just 28 percent of the respondents reported operating pursuant to a formal policy; whereas, approximately 57 percent said they were directed in their response by informal policy or past practice. A total of 13 percent reported no policy guidance at all.

A categorical breakdown revealed that the larger the district, the greater the chances of formal policy direction. Well over 50 percent of the Large Districts reported formal policies. The Mid-Size and Small Districts followed with 41 percent and 34 percent respectively, while in the rural group, only 27 percent of the respondents said that their districts had taken the time to promulgate a formal policy. As one would expect, the converse is true when it comes to the lack of formal guidance, with 28 percent of the smallest districts operating on an *ad hoc* basis.

Lawsuits

During the five-year period, a total of seven lawsuits against schools resulted from the suicides and attempted suicides. The 462 respondents reported a minimum of 133 deaths and at least 900 documented suicide attempts by students. Only one suit had been filed against a Small District. None occurred in the rural subcategory. In the few instances in which civil actions followed a student death or self-inflicted injury, the result was unfavorable to the defendant district on five occasions.

The survey sought to determine the possible driving forces in parental decisions to sue by asking what type of criticism districts had received in the wake of a student death. The responses showed that in all seven cases, the school districts were criticized for failing to refer troubled students for counseling prior to the death. The second most stated criticism was the lack of parental notice of their child's suicidal ideations while at school. Finally, there was criticism of school failure to notify parents of changes in attitudes and moods.

Analysis of Legal Principles

Case Law

Case authority in this area of law is inconsistent; however, several principles have evolved which provide guidance for educators. The first recorded appellate court decision in a lawsuit involving a student suicide is that of the Wisconsin Supreme Court in the case of ***Bogust v. Iverson*** (10 Wis2d 129, 102 NW2d 228 [1960]). This case ensued in the wake of the suicide of a college student following the termination of a professional relationship by her school counselor and his failure to either refer the student for psychiatric evaluation or notify her parents of her emotional problems. The court found for the counselor and refused to impose a legal duty upon such persons to recognize in a student a condition which involves a medical diagnosis. In addition, the justices declared that, even if the counselor was negligent in his failure to refer or notify parents, the student's act of killing herself was the legal cause of her death thus relieving the counselor of legal responsibility. The New York Supreme Court Appellate Division ruled similarly when the sister of a high school student who shot himself while sitting in the vice principal's office awaiting discipline sued seeking compensation for her mental and emotional distress (***Shaner v. Greece Central School District*** 51 AD2d 662, 378 NYS2d 185 [NY App 1976]).

The first judicial recognition of a plaintiff's rights in such circumstances came in a federal civil rights lawsuit in Oregon which began when a student confronted a teacher with a handgun in class. The teacher convinced the boy to accompany him to an empty room to speak to the vice principal. The boy kept the gun in his waistband and produced a suicide note. The vice principal asked the boy to accompany him to the principal's office. A police officer appeared and told the boy that he was in trouble with the law. Minutes later the boy was allowed to go to the bathroom where he shot himself. The parents claimed that school officials violated their right to care, custody, and companionship of their son in violation of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit ruled that parents do possess such rights and that they may recover damages if it is proven that the public school authorities, while acting according to some policy, regulation, or practice, deprived the plaintiffs of that right without due process of law (***Kelson v. City of Springfield*** 767 F2d 651 [9th Cir 1985]).

Two cases, one a state case and the other a federal court decision applying state law, imposed greater responsibilities upon educators where specific applicable statutes had been promulgated.

In 1991, the Supreme Court of Maryland, in ***Eisel v. Board of Education of Montgomery County*** (324 Md 376, 597 A2d 447 [1991]), advanced the rights of recovery for plaintiffs and limited the protection afforded school defendants by the *Bogust* decision. The facts involved a thirteen-year-old girl who became obsessed with satanism and self-destruction. During the week prior to her death in a murder-suicide pact with another teenager, the girl revealed her plans to friends, who told the school counselor. He called the girl into his office and confronted her with the information. She denied any suicidal ideations. The school counselor did not report any of these events to the girl's parents. Significant in this case was the existence of a state Youth Suicide Prevention law and regulations. In conjunction with the state mandates, the local school board had promulgated a "suicide prevention" policy. In upholding the parents' claims, the Maryland Supreme Court recognized the growth of the social problem of youth suicide and declared that the imposition of a legal duty upon school counselors to take steps to prevent student suicide was reasonable where the professional has actual notice of such intent.

The second case was brought in a federal court in Florida after a thirteen-year-old committed suicide at home, following two attempts at school. The federal court was asked to interpret and apply the Florida School Health Services Act to the facts of the case. It found that the mandate to schools to carry out school-based health services to "appraise, protect, and promote the health of students," together with the requirement of district "health service" plans which provide for "consulting with students' parents/guardians regarding the need for health attention," required affirmative action on the part of school personnel. Additionally, regulations obliged educators to immediately notify parents or responsible adults designated by the parents in the event of accident or serious illness. Thus, pursuant to the duty to adequately supervise students, school officials can be held liable for foreseeable injuries for failure to notify parents when a child is in such an acute emotional state that he or she is not just talking about suicide, but attempting it (***Wyke v. Polk County School District*** 129 F3d 560 [11th Cir 1997]).

Despite the recognition by the federal courts of constitutionally protected parental rights and the application of specific state statutes, state courts have not hesitated to provide broad-based legal protection for schools. In Michigan, an intermediate appellate court applied state tort immunity laws to afford complete protection from liability for elected officials and the highest appointive executive officials in that state's school districts. In the case of ***Nalepa v. Plymouth-Canton Community School District et al*** (207 Mich App 580, 525 NW2d 897 [Mich App 1994]), a second-grade student hanged himself from the safety rail of his bunk bed the night following a showing in his classroom of a movie depicting the struggles

of a young handicapped boy. In addition to immunizing the school board and the chief executive officer, the Michigan Court of Appeals declared that Michigan did not recognize the legal theory of educational malpractice, thereby releasing the dead boy's teacher.

In Idaho, the state supreme court built on the *Bogust* and *Eisel* precedents finding that there is no duty on the part of districts to promulgate suicide protection programs. Thus, the board is protected by "discretionary immunity" for not doing so. Furthermore, teachers are under no general duty to look for potential suicides or to take action to prevent such conduct. Where state law mandates protection of the health and welfare of pupils, any legal obligation will run to those with specialized training and actual knowledge of the suicidal intentions of a specific student. Finally, a teacher who takes it upon him- or herself to try to assist a troubled student does not assume a legally enforceable duty to protect that person (***Brooks v. Logan*** 944 P2d 709 [Idaho 1997]).

The only reported case to date in Illinois involved a senior in high school who told friends that he was going to kill himself and wrote suicide notes. The friends reported to the counselor who interviewed the boy and contacted his mother. The counselor advised the mother to take her son to the hospital for drug overdose treatment. He did not mention the suicide threat. On the way to the hospital, the young man leaped from the moving automobile. Later, he jumped from a highway overpass and died. The mother's law suit alleged negligence on the part of the district for not promulgating a suicide prevention program in accord with a state statute authorizing school boards to conduct inservice training for staff and mandating suicide intervention as a topic. The suit also accused the counselor of negligence for failing to take adequate precautions to prevent the suicide.

In accordance with the growing line of cases, the Illinois Appellate Court read the Illinois School Code inservice training provision as a legislative grant of discretion to boards to adopt such training if deemed appropriate. Only if a specific board chose to exercise that discretion would the suicide intervention training mandate apply. Consequently, the Illinois Local Governmental and Governmental Employees Tort Immunity Act provides immunity from suit with regard to the exercise of that discretion unless there is proof of willful and wanton conduct. Moreover, the Tort Immunity Act specifically immunizes public agents and entities for failure to diagnose physical or mental conditions or for misdiagnosing such afflictions without commensurate proof of willful and wanton conduct. Nevertheless, the justices explained that willful and wanton conduct may occur when someone possesses knowledge that circumstances pose a high probability that someone may be seriously harmed and consciously disregards that knowledge. Thus, though the evidence was insufficient in this case, the court did state that a case of willful and wanton conduct could arise if a counselor fails to take any action upon learning of a student's suicidal intentions.

In dissent, one justice wrote that it was her reading of the law that the failure of a counselor to notify parents of a student's suicidal ideations after obtaining actual knowledge of impending danger does, indeed, constitute willful and wanton disregard for the student's life and health (***Grant v. Board of Trustees of Valley View School District*** 221 Ill Dec 902, 676 NE2d 705 [Ill App 1997]).

Finally, when a student has been identified pursuant to the special education laws, special legal circumstances arise. To date, there appear to be two court decisions involving suicides by special education students. The first, an unpublished ruling by a federal trial court in Maryland, arose after the death of a junior high boy who had been identified with a Serious Emotional Disorder (SED). The trial court summarily found for the educators on grounds of insufficient evidence specifically because of other evidence of a family history of such conduct and that the boy was in the control of his mother when the act occurred (***Scott v Montgomery County Board of Education*** 120 F3d 262 [1997]) .

The second decision comes from the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in an Arizona case. In this case, a sixteen-year-old special education student identified as learning disabled with psychological and emotional problems had experienced a variety of problems over a seven-year period. Two months before his death, he told an aide that "maybe I would be better off dead." In a separate conversation, he told the aide that he was going to shoot himself. The aide informed the counselor. They both knew that the boy had access to firearms. On the day of his death, the boy was reprimanded by the principal for harassing an elementary student. During the conversation, in the presence of the school counselor, he threatened the teacher who reported him, her son and her car. He was immediately suspended by the principal for security purposes. The principal instructed the counselor to drive the student home. The principal did not attempt to contact the parents and did not instruct the counselor to do so, which is a direct violation of district policy. The counselor drove the "very angry" boy home and dropped him off without attempting to determine if either of the parents were home. Later in the day, the parents returned to find their son dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. The trial court dismissed the federal civil rights case against the district but refused to do so with regard to the principal and counselor. Upon review, the federal appeals court upheld the trial court finding that a jury might reasonably conclude that the individual defendants' actions "created the danger" which caused the harm in violation of the plaintiffs' 14th Amendment substantive due process rights (***Armijo v. Wagon Mound Public Schools et al*** 159 F3d 1253 [10th Cir 1998]).

Summary of Legal Principles

The case law precedents in the area of student suicide are consistent with the results of the present research. Since the first reported court decision in 1961, there have been fewer than 15 published decisions and they are inconsistent in their holdings and rationales. Nonetheless, there are a number of rules which can assist educators and policymakers:

1. The law does not require educators without specific training and experience to discover or diagnose psychiatric, psychological, or emotional conditions which may lead to a student doing harm to him- or herself.
2. Without specific legal mandates, school districts are under no duty to protect students from themselves or to promulgate suicide prevention programs.
3. Where there are laws or regulatory mandates, educators are responsible for knowing the law and for strict adherence thereto.
4. In the absence of specific state immunity statutes, courts have readily protected boards and executive personnel from civil liability in the exercise of their policymaking discretion. In addition, state immunity statutes often provide additional measures of protection from liability.
5. Federal courts have recognized a constitutionally protected "liberty interest" in the care, custody, and companionship of children. School districts and/or school personnel may be held liable if a student suicide results from the application or misapplication of a law, policy, or practice of the school and such a result could have been reasonably predicted.
6. Teachers who take it upon themselves to try to assist troubled students do not assume a legal duty to protect the student or to prevent harm.
7. A clear trend is to find that professionals with specific training (i.e., counselors, social workers, and psychologists) will be held to a duty to notify parents or guardians when they possess actual knowledge of circumstances which pose serious risk to the well-being of a student. This same duty may well apply to building principals under similar circumstances.
8. The duty to exercise reasonable care in the prevention of harm to students will outweigh confidentiality when a professional has actual knowledge of specific circumstances which pose grave danger to a specific person.
9. If a special education student experiences suicidal ideations and it is reasonable to conclude that they are a manifestation of the student's disability, all involved school personnel must adhere strictly to the Individual Education Program (IEP) and all applicable law, regulations, and policies.

Findings and Recommendations

This research shows that more than 90 percent of school districts with 1,000 or fewer students in Illinois have not had to cope with student suicide. Still, it is troubling that nearly 30 percent of all student suicides reported in the past five years cost the life of a boy or girl in a small school. Moreover, the smallest schools, those with 500 or fewer enrollment, account for 18 percent of the total self-inflicted deaths among Illinois young people. Clearly, small town Illinois provides no safe haven. Depression, substance abuse problems, and the loss of loved ones transcend geographic and urban boundaries.

Equally as troubling is the finding that small and rural schools have not yet recognized and/or addressed the growing phenomenon of suicide among today's youth. Those who are apt to become the most involved, teachers and principals, have the least training and the least policy guidance. Community leaders have not addressed the problem for a variety of reasons. There is still a very real social stigma accompanying the act of suicide. In addition, school leaders fear open discussion of the topic lest they accidentally provide the suggestion to an otherwise troubled young person.

Recommendations

Openly recognize the problem. The initial, and most important, step in dealing with student suicide is for school policymakers and educators to openly recognize the problem. Once this is accomplished, measures to overcome the social stigma and "code of silence" can be employed to address the issue constructively. Education of school leaders must precede policy and programmatic initiatives.

Gather resources and information. Resources are as close as the nearest school psychologist, counselor, community mental health agency, university, or Internet connection. The following web sites provide good references, resources and program ideas:

- **American Association of Suicidology (www. suicidology.org)** Among the information and resources provided are guidelines for schools in the aftermath of a suicide, guidebooks for school-based suicide intervention and prevention programs, student involvement programming, a support group directory, and a speakers roster.

- **American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (www.afsp.org)** This organization funds research, education, and treatment programs aimed at the prevention of suicide. The site contains a Youth Suicide link.

- **Yellow Ribbon Program of the Light for Life Foundation (www.yellowribbonsd.org)** This site is devoted to the prevention of youth suicide. The San Diego based organization offers various resources, including crisis hotline information, films, and the Yellow Ribbon Program. The program is an ingenious early warning and prevention effort employing yellow ribbons and Yellow Ribbon Cards as nonverbal "cries for help".

Promulgate a district policy. Many districts have promulgated crisis management plans. Additionally, in the wake of the Columbine High School killings/suicides, there are renewed initiatives for schools to address these potentialities. Judging from the results of the present study, there appears to be a general dearth of policy guidance for faculty and building-level administrators when it comes to student suicide.

The weight of the law is protective of educators who take reason-based proactive stances to protect students from themselves in such circumstances. In fact, at least two states, Maryland and Florida, have passed laws mandating youth suicide prevention programs in the schools. To date, Illinois has no corollaries, and there does not appear to be any on the horizon. Still, some commentators advocate district-level suicide prevention policies and programs involving the total school staff (Rhea 1995).

Such programs involve training of faculty and staff to recognize signs of depression and other indicators of suicide danger. The danger in such comprehensive suicide prevention programs, other than those mandated by statute, lies in administration.

Unless regularly monitored, updated, and efficiently executed, such policies pose a danger of creating false expectations about the ability of the district and its staff to prevent an occurrence which they are often powerless to do. That is not to say that educational leaders should continue to ignore this growing problem among our youth — quite the contrary. Illinois law, in its direction to school boards to conduct inservice training programs, specifically declares "(S)chool guidance counselors, teachers, and other school personnel who work with pupils in grades 7 through 12 shall be trained to identify the warning signs of suicidal behavior in adolescents and teens and shall be taught appropriate intervention and referral techniques" (Chapter 105, ILCS).

Where, as in Illinois, there is a mandate to train school people but none to promulgate comprehensive districtwide suicide prevention programs, the simplest and most effective policy guidance a school district can provide is a mandate of full communication with parents and guardians. Indeed, the Illinois survey revealed that in virtually all law suits filed following the death of a child, the lack of notice to parents is cited as a motivating factor in the decision to file the action. Any such policy should mandate timely direct contact between counselors, social workers, psychologists, principals, and parents. In a situation in which a student expresses suicidal ideations to a teacher or other staff member, there should be direction for the immediate report to the appropriate professional personnel and building-level administrators. All reports should be documented contemporaneously by the reporter with pertinent details, including the date, time, and persons notified.

To be sure, the ultimate responsibility for the welfare of children still lies with parents and guardians. The courts continue to recognize that fact where there is no clear legal mandate otherwise. But as stated above, a clear trend in judicial analysis in student suicide cases is to hold trained personnel to a duty of notice to those who are ultimately responsible. It is a duty which can be easily fulfilled and has the greatest potential for advancing the best interests of the troubled child.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the tragic suicide of thirteen-year-old Erin Lyn Melvin, Galva High School Principal Steve Johnson was forced to sit before the girl's stricken parents and testify that, given what he thought he knew about their daughter, "there was just no reason to think that this was a serious note" (Johnson 1998, p. 22). As of this writing, the school district has tried unsuccessfully to assert the Illinois Local Governmental and Governmental Employees Tort Immunity Act as a basis for a motion to dismiss the case. As in Galva, Illinois, the tragic lesson is being learned in too many of America's schools.

The days of dismissing youthful talk of self-destruction are over. School personnel must take every suicide threat seriously and employ all reasonable precaution to protect the child. Sadly, the deaths continue as does the grief and the lawsuits, and in far too many cases, tragedy occurs for want of simple recognition of a problem or a timely telephone call.

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The Rural Research Report is a series published by the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs to provide brief updates on research projects conducted by the Institute. Rural Research Reports are distributed to public officials, libraries, and professional associations involved with specific policy issues.

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